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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000358

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SUBJECT: THE AKP TURNS UP THE HEAT

Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL SHARON A. WIENER FOR REASONS (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. As the decision by the Constitutional Court in the closure case looms nearer, AKP (Justice and Development Party) party officials and sympathizers in Istanbul have begun to press us more forcefully for visible USG support for the party. We have been careful in our responses to these entreaties, explaining that the U.S. is following a careful line, designed to demonstrate our support for democracy while avoiding being drawn into Turkish domestic politics. This argument, which had been sufficient until early June, no longer appears to resonate and seems to be viewed, by both the pro- and anti-AKP camps, as a lack of support for the party. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Ibrahim Yildirim, member of the Istanbul AKP administrative board and one of our closest AKP contacts, approached the CG in mid June to make a direct appeal for support. He reiterated this plea, contrasting U.S statements unfavorably with EU comments, at an event hosted by the CG on June 20. In this discussion, he - accompanied by several other influential AKP operatives - expressed their concern about the outcome of the closure case and called for more vocal support by senior US officials for the AKP. One member of the group specifically asked whether we had been approached by retired judges or generals seeking our support against the AKP. We explained that in our view the ruling party is clearly the democratically elected government and noted that we were not plotting with Kemalists to remove the party from government. Comment: This would have seemed like an over-wrought conspiracy theory had ANAP (Motherland) party founder and former Istanbul mayor Bedrettin Dalan not, at the same event, made a special point of telling the CG that US policy on the closure case was correct and had been "noted favorably." End Comment.

¶3. (C) On June 22, AKP MP Cuneyd Zapsu told the CG the US, by adopting a "neutral" stance, is in effect supporting the AK Party's enemies. The CG explained our relations with the ruling party should not be interpreted as "neutrality," and noted that in addition to our words, people should be watching our actions. According to Zapsu, it doesn't matter that the USG is continuing to have close relations with the government, has received FM Babacan at senior levels in Washington, and is talking about democracy and the will of the voters. "They" (meaning anti-AKP elements in the military and judiciary) don't pay any attention to that. The Europeans have spoken, but they don't have any influence on the people who are trying to shut the AKP down. EU opposition to the closure case is viewed as a convenient excuse to keep Turkey out of the EU by criticizing Turkish democracy. This discounts the impact of criticism emanating from Brussels. According to Zapsu, only the United States has influence with those trying to close the party and the message needs to come from the U.S. military.

¶4. (C) As for reassuring the opposition here about AKP's true intentions, Zapsu passionately asked "Have you listened to

what the Prime Minister has been saying the last month?" He added that Erdogan asks him "What more can I do?" Zapsu said he knows that the PM is not someone who wants Turkey to be Iran, that the PM has tried to make that clear and they're at a loss for what else they can do. Zapsu argued the rest of the country is not like Istanbul; in Anatolia Erdogan is viewed as a hero and people are very, very upset about the closure case.

15. (C) Religiously-oriented civil society leaders without formal roles in the AKP have also made a point of noting their concerns with regard to the closure case. TUSKON Secretary General Mustafa Gunay complained bitterly about the US failure to show unequivocal support for the ruling party. He said that in an effort to deal with the closure case crisis, the AKP and its supporters, in particular TUSKON, were trying to initiate dialogue with major industrialists and business leaders to seek their support, but they had been rebuffed by many. TUSKON's efforts appear to be bearing fruit with some members of the business community, as TUSIAD Board member Aldo Kaslowski told the CG "We all feel responsible for this. We voted for them." Comment: The AKP's success in reforming the economy during its first term in office combined with the lack of a secular center right alternative in the 2007 elections made the AKP the party of choice for many voters who placed more importance on economic than social issues. End Comment.

16. (C) Comment: In addition to profound differences between the ardent secularist and AKP worldview there is also a significant failure to communicate - both literally in terms of the dialog TUSKON is attempting to start and figuratively.

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For example, on June 25 PM Erdogan in what was most likely an attempt to reassure not alarm, told a group of senior local and expat business figures that Turkey had changed significantly during the past five years and that under continued AKP leadership "even more significant changes" would be made over the next three to five years. Despite Zapsu's assurance that the PM is doing everything he can to assure his opponents of his commitment to a secular state, this type of remark feeds into conspiracy theories and does nothing to reassure secularists that the AKP isn't planning profound changes to the Turkish state and society. Similarly, when the CG asked Zapsu whether there wasn't a chance that the result would be just the opposite of his goal if the military and judiciary felt they were being forced to cater to US wishes, he really didn't have an answer. End Comment.

WIENER